



Public Affairs Office
82nd Airborne Division
Fort Bragg, NC 28310-5000
Phone (910) 432-0661

March 25, 2013

82nd Abn. Div. paratroopers compete for 'Best NCO, Trooper' title

Story and photo by Sgt. Joseph Guenther with 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division Public Affairs

FORT BRAGG, N.C. – Paratroopers who were declared by their brigades to be the best of the 82nd Airborne Division sat outside the All American

Conference Room

March 22, quietly concentrating their calloused, exhausted minds on hundreds of Army regulations, soldier tasks and their respective units' histories. The outward appearance of calm patience obscured their inner rehearsals of possible answers to any unknown number of

questions that they may be presented with once finally seated face-to-face with the division's command sergeant major.

These airborne soldiers are vying for the coveted title of the 82nd Airborne Division's Noncommissioned or Trooper of the Year. The competitors, after winning a series of NCO and Trooper boards in their respective units, faced a new series of challenges as they ascended beyond the brigade level to compete.



The 82nd Airborne Division's annual Noncommissioned Officer and Trooper of the Year competition enters its third day as the competitors complete a variety of Warrior Task stations ranging from weapons proficiency to reacting to indirect fire at the division's Pre-Ranger camp, Fort Bragg, N.C., March 21, 2013.

“It’s a great honor to be selected by the command sergeant major out of 5,000 troops,” said Staff Sgt. Minoj Mukkada, the NCO representing 18th Fires Brigade. “There is a lot of responsibility, so I don’t take it lightly.”

Unlike previous contests, which relied exclusively on their personal presentation of themselves and the ability to verbally demonstrate their knowledge and leadership style, the division-level competition requires all candidates to prove their abilities first-hand.

Preparation for the 82nd Airborne Division NCO and Trooper of the Year competition is no small task for any soldier. Sgt. Jason Sharp and Spc. Justin Sampson from 2nd Brigade Combat Team moved from one battalion to another studying and training with subject matter experts such as infantrymen, medics, and communications specialists, Sharp said.

Others relied heavily on the devotion and discipline of their leadership, such as Spc. Lawrence Anderson, the Trooper representing 3rd Brigade Combat Team. Anderson began his journey on a staff duty shift with his team leader, Sgt. Rochelle Montal.

“He started off when we both had staff duty together, so we started studying,” Montal said. “We had been in the field for a week and a half so out there we started doing hands-on weapons and started going over land [navigation] and everything that the competition consists of.”

Before the candidates were even given the opportunity to demonstrate their skills as soldiers, they had to prove they could compete by taking an Army Physical Fitness Test. In the bitter winter cold, long before sunrise on March 19, 2013, three days before the board, the candidates assembled at Towle Stadium to prove their superior levels of fitness.

Their scores, which will be tallied along with their performance in the other events, were excellent for many of the candidates, said Staff Sgt. John Stephens, a Pre-Ranger course instructor who graded the PT tests.

“It’s very important because it’s going to set you ahead of the game,” Stephens

explained when discussing the competitor's scores. Among other competitors, he evaluated Sampson, who earned 300 points; a perfect score.

"He has a really good chance because it shows he has initiative to do PT on his own," Stephens said when discussing Sampson's score. "I expect a really good performance from him in all events."

Following the PT test, the competitors moved on to an M4 qualification range. The range, which tests a soldier's ability to shoot at 40 pop-up targets from 25 to 300 meters, is a challenge for any skill level. With only 40 rounds, they were given one chance to earn the highest score possible against their peers in the contest.

On the second day, competitors were required to take a written test on subjects such as weapons and first aid. Finally, they were transported to the Pre-Ranger camp.

The camp is one of the most widely used training areas on Fort Bragg, said 1st Sgt. Damon Ritz.

"We run our 11 Pre-Ranger courses a year; when we're not in cycle we open the training area to all the units on Fort Bragg," Ritz said.

"Almost every day there's units out here training or using the obstacle course," Ritz said. "Every year, we host the division NCO and Trooper of the year competition."

Passersby driving by the camp will never see more than a simple brown sign along the side of the road, and a dirt path disappearing into the dense pine woods that the area is known for. Once entering the camp, a visitor has a rare opportunity to view the Army in a way unseen by many for decades. The buildings are simple wooden structures providing students with little more than a place to sleep and train indoors.

After moving to the isolated camp miles away from the hustle and urban feel of the main Fort Bragg post, Mukkada reflected on the simplicity of the environment.

"It adds more professionalism and authenticates what we're doing out here and takes it to another level of seriousness," he explained. "It's good to be a part of it."

The cadre, who are required to be Ranger qualified NCOs with time served as squad leaders, commended each of the Paratroopers who were at the camp to compete.

“I think it shows a lot about their leadership,” said Staff Sgt. Michael Gonzales, one of the PRC instructors. “They have the self-discipline and motivation to constantly try to perform at a higher level, and not just accept the standard but to exceed the standard.”

“Each candidate that we’ve seen thus far has demonstrated the ability to complete all these basic soldier tasks and are motivated and seem like they are prepared for these events,” Gonzales explained.

For their final series of hands-on tasks, each of the competitors were individually tested on their abilities to operate the most common weapon systems of the Army, including assembly and correcting malfunctions.

They worked on the icy ground as the sun came over the trees. Despite the cold, each of the competitors pushed themselves to complete their tasks under strict time limits. While some operated machine guns by the numbers, others were throwing grenades at targets or treating simulated casualties with amputated limbs.

Finally, after three days of intense testing, the candidates were faced with what many would believe to be the most stressful and challenging event: the board. The 82nd Airborne Division has long been famous for its high standards, and this longstanding traditional formality is no exception.

During this final event, each candidate is individually evaluated by Command Sgt. Maj. LaMarquis Knowles, the senior enlisted adviser of the division, along with each of the brigade command sergeants major.

One at a time, the candidates are asked to demonstrate that they have what it takes to be the NCO or Trooper of the year by answering dozens of questions on many topics. Some of the candidates disappeared into the All American Conference Room for as long as an hour. They each walked out relieved that it was finally over, regardless of their performance.

After three days of waiting, the winners were finally chosen. For the second year in a row, both winners represented the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, or the “Panther Brigade.”

From the 82nd Brigade Support Battalion, the 82nd Airborne Division’s Trooper of the Year is Spc. Lawrence Anderson, and the division’s NCO of the year is Staff Sgt. Cory Schmidt.

Schmidt, an infantryman in 1st Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment said the most important thing that helped him was the noncommissioned officers that trained and mentored him when he was a young paratrooper.

“I’ve had a lot of great leadership over the years, and I can’t thank them enough for helping me prepare for this,” Schmidt said.

Anderson added, “We are the second pair to win this competition back to back; it shows how well our brigade prepares our soldiers.”

“I feel like this shows my potential and my drive,” Anderson concluded.

These Panther paratroopers will soon move on to represent the division at the XVIII Airborne Corps NCO and Soldier of the Year competition where they are expected to once again prove the superior nature of the paratrooper.

“Now it’s my personal mission to win at the next competition and represent the 82nd Airborne Division,” Schmidt said

